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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 000305

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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/IRAN: DUTCH DCM TO TEHRAN ON STATE OF
IRANIAN SOCIETY

REF: THE HAGUE 253 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew J. Schofer; reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (C) Summary: According to the Dutch DCM to Tehran Roderick Wols, international pressure is hurting Iranian President Ahmadinejad's popularity. The wealthy remain wealthy, the middle class continues to suffer, but now the poor are beginning to feel the pinch as well. Wols painted a picture of a pro-American Iranian populace, eager to cast off a regime they see as having failed to deliver either economic progress or the freedom's denied under the Shah. Still, he warned that an attack by the U.S. would unify the Iranian people. End summary.

12. (C) Political Counselor and poloff met February 6 with Roderick Wols, the Dutch DCM assigned to Tehran. Wols was in The Hague for consultations. According to Wols, international pressure and voluntary sanctions on Iran are weakening the popularity of Iranian President Ahmadinejad. Students are not marching in the streets, he said, but criticism is growing. Tomatoes cost \$3.25 a kilo, potatoes have doubled in a year, and housing costs have increased 40% year over year.

13. (C) Subsidies on benzine and staple items were becoming a burden for the government, he added, and might not be sustainable. The poor were feeling the first pinches of economic hardship but so far remained more or less content. A lifting of subsidies, Wols thought, could change that. The middle class, he said, continues to suffer the most, and one-year "safe haven" visa requests from this group were increasing noticeably at the Dutch embassy. The wealthy elite benefit from the existing system of governmental controls, he said.

14. (C) Wols described a very astute government propaganda machine. Showing pol counselor and poloff copies of four English language editions of major Iranian dailies, he explained that the regime effectively mixed mistruth and truth, and made maximum effect of any domestic U.S. criticism of USG policies. He argued that the Iranian people are deprived of alternate sources of information, and that Western media assistance programs are therefore vital.

15. (C) Iranians are not entirely cut off from outside news, though. Wols explained that with the high level of travel to and from Iran - the Netherlands alone processes nearly 60,000 visas a year, most of it for transit travel to the U.S. and Canada - news did travel. People are wise to regime propaganda, as well. He recounted visiting a farm outside Tehran and speaking with an illiterate pastachio farmer. The

farmer laughed about Ahmadinejad's trip to Venezuela, saying that the tractors that were delivered as a gesture of goodwill had all been confiscated from Iranian farms.

¶16. (C) Wols painted a picture of an Iranian society that is, just below the surface, quite open. He said that, although homosexuality and alcohol and mixing of the sexes were officially discouraged, what happens in private is tolerated. He described western style house parties, with alcohol. In many ways, he added, it was easier for homosexuals to find partners and to socialize openly than for heterosexual couples. He opined that his own government's condemnation of the execution of several homosexual men last year was politically motivated and did not reflect accurately the possible criminal culpability of the men on the specific charges, which included rape and murder.

¶17. (C) Wols cautioned the U.S. on the subject of Iranian nationalism. Iranians generally believe they have a right to nuclear programs, though they do not really make the finer distinction between weapons and nuclear power. They do not like the negative attention Ahmadinejad is drawing to Iran, but they will rally around him in the event of an attack. Wols said that he believed, based on unspecified Dutch embassy sources, that Ahmadinejad had also fallen out of favor with the Grand Ayatollah.

¶18. (C) Wols described ethnic relations inside Iran as "an area of concern" (reftel). He noted that 40% of the population is either non-Shia or non-Persian, and that the government was acutely sensitive to ethnic strife. He noted that tensions flared among Azeris last year, following derogatory newspaper cartoons about them, and that the Ahwazi

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and Kurdish populations continued to pose a challenge for the government.

¶19. (C) Comment: Wols is an experienced diplomat with years in the Persian Gulf region, and his remarks seemed genuine. His comments on the possible ramifications to a U.S. attack on Iran, while certainly not unique in Dutch foreign policy circles, seemed based on a substantial amount of interaction with Iranian society.
BLAKEMAN